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SNOW-SNAKE AS PLAYED BY THE
SENECA-IROQUOIS

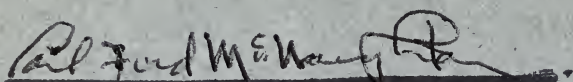
BY

ARTHUR C. PARKER

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thors and family heirloom books.
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Earl Ford McNaughton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "E" and a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Earl Ford McNaughton

ARTHUR C. PARKER

I, No. 2, April-June, 1909]

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SENECA-IROQUOIS

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THE following notes on the game of snow-snake as played by the Seneca-Iroquois were recorded during the winter of 1905-06, at which time the writer was engaged in making ethnological studies among the various Iroquois tribes for the New York State Library and the New York State Museum.

With the male Seneca snow-snake is the most popular outdoor winter pastime, finding equal favor with the Christian element and the "pagan" party. Missionary effort has been directed toward discouraging the sport, because of the gambling which seems an indissoluble part of it. The game is a simple one, and well known to ethnologists, the aim being to throw a long smooth stick, called a snake, *gawasa*, through a trough in the snow a greater distance than one's opponent.

The snow-snake is a smooth, polished, flexible stick, from five to nine feet in length. The average stick is an inch broad at the head, and tapers down to nearly half an inch at the tail or finger end. In thickness it tapers from half an inch in the middle to a quarter of an inch at the tail. The head, *gagon'da'ge*, is conical in shape, or approximately so, and is usually an inch in diameter at the base, where it is beveled to the plane of the body. The head is slightly upturned, like the fore part of a skate-runner. The pointed end, *gane'gowa*, is tipped with lead, grooves being cut in the wood and melted lead poured into a cone of paper or rawhide previously wrapped about the nose of the snake; the lead hardening, the paper or skin is unwrapped and the excess of lead is trimmed down with a knife or a file. The metal end serves the double purpose of protecting the head from becoming blunted or split, and of giving greater momentum to the stick when in motion. When no lead or pewter is to be had, the nose is roughly hewn out and then charred in a fire. The charred wood is scraped off, more definite shape given, and the charring repeated. This charring is



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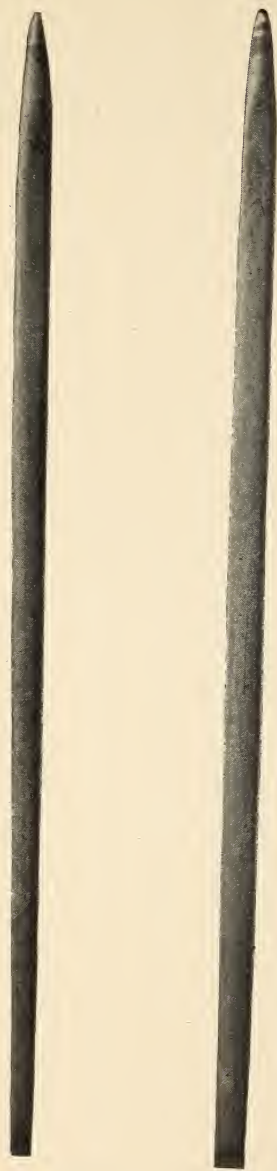


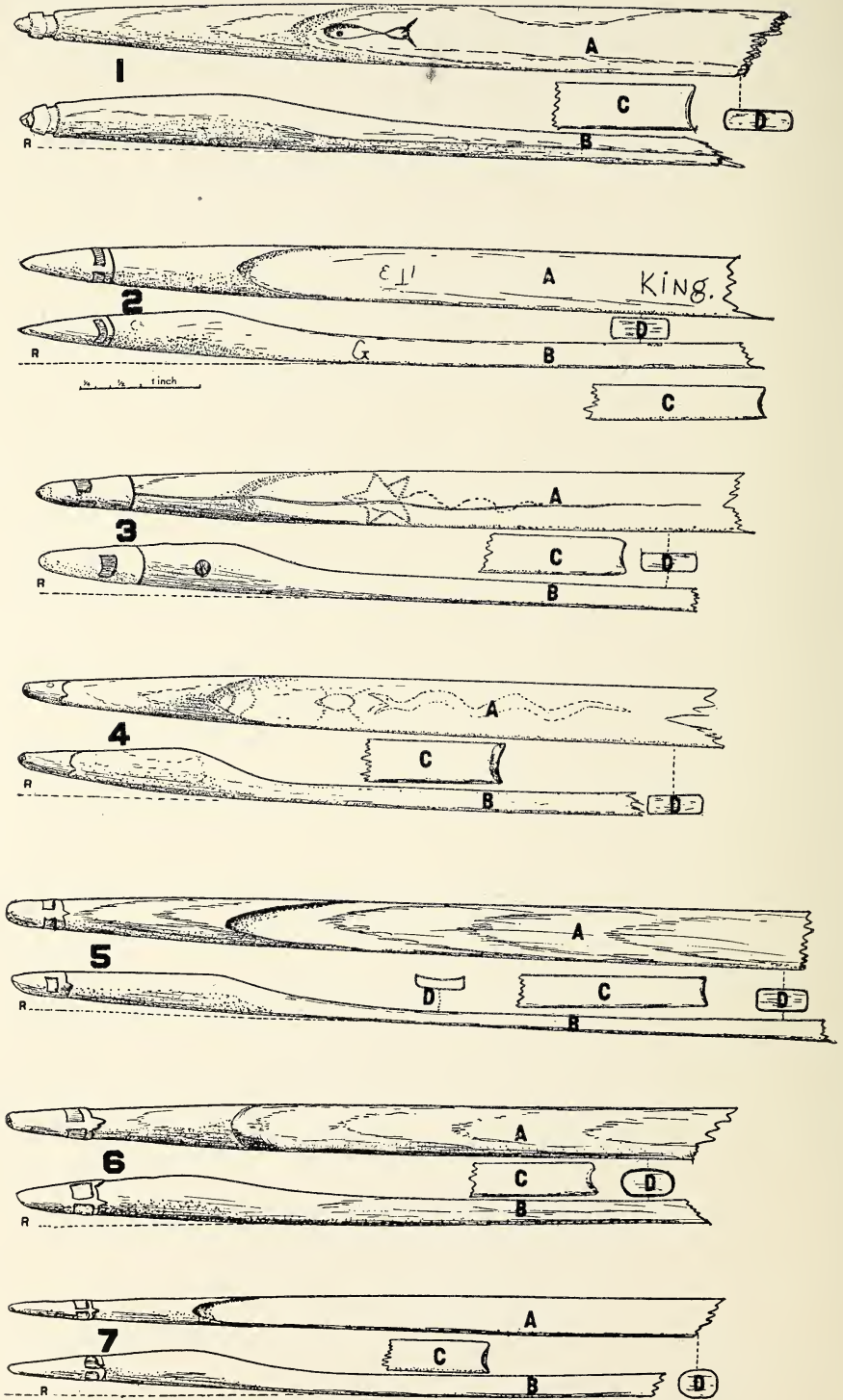
FIG. 56.—Short snow-snakes used on the Tonawanda Seneca reservation. Each snake is 30 inches long.

said to harden and give greater weight to the wood. The end or tail of the snake, *gətgwi'gäge'*, is made slightly concave to afford a better finger-hold. Snow-snakes are made of various kinds of hard wood, such as maple and walnut, it being believed that some woods are better adapted to certain kinds of snow. This special knowledge is kept secret by the various experts in the art of snow-snakery. Some woods are used exclusively for throwing in light feathery snow, others for ice, others for crusty snow, and still other varieties for soft melting snow. The selection of proper sticks is therefore a matter of no small importance. Each stick has some distinctive mark by which its owner may recognize it among others. Three sticks constitute a set for throwing, although a complete set for all conditions of snow often contains twelve or fifteen. Long cloth bags, divided into compartments just wide and long enough for the sticks, are used as cases. The set of sticks is sheathed in the divisions of the bag, and when not in use the case is rolled up, tied, and stored in a place where the snow-snakes will not warp or otherwise deteriorate.

A level, though sometimes a slightly sloping, tract of ground, usually by some roadside, is selected for a track or trough, *gawoñ'go*. A smooth-barked log, from 10 to 18 inches in diameter, is dragged in a straight line through the snow for a distance of from 90 to 120 rods, accord-



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TYPES OF SENECA SNOW-SNAKES IN THE NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM
A, top view. *B*, side view. *C*, finger end. *D*, cross-section at position indicated.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE XI

<i>Number</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Point of balance from tip of head</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Wood</i>
1	69 inches	29 inches	11 ounces	Ash
2	97 "	41 "	18 "	Maple
3	95 "	40 "	17 "	Maple
4	72 "	31½ "	9 "	Ash
5	82½ "	37 "	12 "	Hickory
6	84 "	47½ "	13 "	Hickory
7	75 "	30 "	9 "	Maple

ing to the slope of the ground. The process is repeated until a smooth icy trough from 10 to 18 inches deep is made. The snow is stamped down at the end selected as a starting point, and back for a distance of a couple of rods, and strewn with fine chips or ashes to prevent slipping. The mouth of the trough, *hadī-yeⁿda'kwa*, is built up higher than the main body of the track, and is also somewhat wider.

The game may be played by two contestants or by organized teams. During the midwinter festival, *Gänā'yūs'ta'*, when the two phratries or rival brotherhoods or clans seek to outdo each other in everything, phratry teams are organized. The clans of the Wolf, the Bear, the Turtle, and the Beaver enter their best players against the skilled experts of the clans of the Deer, Snipe, Heron, and Hawk. Ordinarily teams are made up with no reference to clans, the best players from a reservation or section of a reservation organizing to outdo all comers. In the game between the rival phratries, officers, *honon'diont*, are selected as collectors of the stakes. Each collector carries a pole over his shoulder, and articles to which the owner's name is attached are thrown over it. If live stock is wagered, a feather or a small bunch of hair is tied to the pole, and is redeemable in chicken or pig upon presentation to the party whose name is tied to the feather or hair, in event of that party's clan losing in the contest. Rival collectors meet and endeavor to match articles, value for value. Another round of visits is sometimes necessary to cover heavy betting on one side.

At the beginning of the snow-snake game the rival teams cluster about the clear space at the mouth of the track. The caretakers, *hawaz'o'gās*, unroll the bundle of sticks and place the outspread bag on a low rack made by placing four crotched sticks, set on the points of a rectangle, as upright supports for horizontal cross-pieces.

Governed by the condition of the snow, the *hawaz'o'gās* selects the special sticks for his principal and rubs them with a skin or cloth pad which has previously been saturated with some "secret" compound, *ononk'gwashēt*. Various kinds of gum, wax, tallow, and oil are used, the kind rubbed on the stick depending on the condition of the weather and the snow. These "medicines" are employed to render the stick as smooth as possible and to overcome the

peculiar kind of friction exerted by the various kinds of snow. A good snow-snake is said to have good "stuff" in it, "stuff" referring to the kind of medicine, or "*swagum*," that has been rubbed into it. In ordinary packed snow, when the temperature ranges about 20° F., for example, the snow-snake doctor rubs the stick with refined beeswax or with spermicetti; for wet snow an extra dressing of turkey or duck oil is used. The compounds vary with the different *hawaz'o'gās*, each employing what his experience or imagination directs as best. A good *hawaz'o'gās* commands a liberal fee for his services.

At each game there are from two to four umpires, *hanontgǎ'ot*, whose duty it is to watch the snakes of their parties as they glide over the track and to mark the points where they stop, *öönt'hët*, with a marker, *yěo'dak'wa*.

At a time agreed upon the umpires exclaim, "*Dadiwazayē'*!" and one of the principals, *hē'odyes*, takes a stick from the *hawaz'o'gās*, and going back a rod or two from the mouth of the trough, grasps his snake by the tail, his thumb and middle-finger grasping the sides two or three inches from the end, and his index-finger bent and tightly pressed against the grooved end. The palm of the hand of course is turned upward. Dashing forward with every trained muscle in play, he hurls the snake into the trough, using all his skill to throw accurately and steadily. Just before he drops the stick, about the time when the player draws his arm back for the throw, his opponents jump toward him, making threatening gestures, and shouting in derision and discouragement, "*Toi'sko!*" "*Owāda'go!*" "*Jaguk'!*" "*Shâ!*" "*Whoâ'ho'!*" and other words of like import, hoping to unsteady the player by their clamor. To actually touch him, however, is not permitted. The snake, striking the track in proper form, speeds on swiftly, and the runners, *honō'gâot*, are on instant guard lest anyone impede its progress. In its swift passage through the trough, the flexible stick twists and bends in truly snake-like fashion, its upturned head adding greatly to the resemblance. When it finally stops, the runners mark the point with a marker, *yěondak'wa*. The opposing principal then may throw his stick. His watchers have been alert ever since the first snake reached its goal, lest a lump of ice or snow

be cast into the track to impede the speed of their principal's stick. When the second snake has stopped, the first stick is lifted from the track and the one which has gone the greater distance declared the winner of the point. The object of leaving the first snake in the track is two-fold: it may stop the almost spent stick of the rival, but if, on the other hand, the rival's stick is far from spent, the first stick may have its tail split. The second stick, however, may pass the first without touching it. In some games the sticks are taken from the track immediately after being marked. Three



FIG. 57. — The snow-snake game. The drawing depicts a *hōdiē's* in the act of throwing a snow-snake at one of the midwinter clan games at Newtown, Cattaraugus reservation, Erie county, New York.

out of five points constitute a game between two individual players. A snake is in play immediately upon leaving the hand, and in case of an accidental or a poor throw, there is no retrial. The rules of the game forbid anyone save the thrower, the runners, and the "doctors" to touch a stick. Should a person, especially a rival *hawaz'o'gās*, touch one's stick and be discovered, the cry of "*Dawon'wazarwak'!*" would be raised and the offender disqualified or otherwise punished. The Seneca exclamation quoted means

"he has poisoned the snow-snake." All the other opponents on the teams match their skill, and the team winning the greater number of points wins the game, and the poles of stakes or the rolls of bills, as the case may be, are handed over to the winning side.

After each stick has been thrown, it is carefully rubbed with a dry skin and restored to its case, another stick designed for the same kind of snow being drawn from the bag for service.

Through some inaccuracy in poise, through inexperience or nervousness, the player sometimes throws his stick improperly. If it twists sharply as it leaves the hand it is apt to bound from the track and run into the softer snow outside. If it is not thrown at the proper angle its head may run into the snow when it strikes the track, that is, "spear the track." This accident brings forth many sarcastic jests, such as, "Are you afraid the trough will get away?" "What's the matter, — trying to nail down the snow?" "Thinks he's spearing fish!" etc. If the snake is not thrown with precision, it may not strike the track at all, but scud by outside, though possibly parallel with the track. Sometimes the snake turns turtle and slides on its head and back. This of course spoils the throw. A small lump of ice or of snow, or even a hump in the track, may cause the snake to leap from the trough and run wild outside. Even good players have their share of accidents.

Another form of the game is called *dēyūthä gwüt*, or the "pushing game." Two players, having but one stick between them, pace off a certain distance, say 200 yards, on each side of a given point in a level road. Player A and player B each takes a position at a given distance from the mark. A, having the stick, throws toward the central point and in the direction of B, coming, for example within ten yards of the latter. This is B's advantage. He advances ten yards to the snake, picks it up, and throws toward A, passing him, for example again, by five yards. A must therefore retreat from the central point five yards, take the stick, and throw again. If he comes only within 25 yards of B, B may advance toward the central mark to the snake and throw it back to A. If B is the better player, he can gradually push A back until he, B, stands upon the central mark and becomes the winner, when the game is

ended. Two well-matched players sometimes play for hours, one gaining inch by inch until the mark is reached.

Good players are able to throw a snow-snake on a level track for a distance of from 300 to 400 yards, and exceptional players claim greater distances. The distance increases, naturally, when slightly down-grade tracks are used.

The Tonawanda Seneca use snow-snakes 30 inches long, claiming greater distance records as a reason for their use. The discovery was made, they assert, through the breaking of a famous old stick, which, rather than discard, the owner used with surprising results. This discovery was made, I was informed, five or six years ago, and henceforth dozens of good old snow-snakes had their tails amputated by curious experimenters. The shorter snake requires a different method of throwing. There are two specimens of the short snow-snake in the New York State Museum, which I collected in 1906 from the Tonawanda reservation. Of the larger sticks, the State Museum has more than twenty of various woods, weights, and lengths.

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